



SHELTER NYC GIMME SHELTER



Prepare yourself for a Sunday morning epiphany, as Andy Thomas explores the deeper side of clubbing NYC style. For over a decade and a half The Shelter has provided a sanctuary where the post-Garage dance community can express themselves freely and where racial and sexual diversity are a force for togetherness.

Story: Andy Thomas Photography: Dustin Ross

It's 6.30am on a beautiful Sunday morning in New York. Rather than making our way back from a night out, we've actually woken up to take a short ride to the City's longest running house club, where we've been told by various heads both in London and while digging for those disco and boogie classics down in the East Village: "It's best to arrive around seven in the morning".

Opening in 1991, The Shelter has become a sanctuary where racial and sexual diversity are a force for togetherness, and where the post-Garage dance community can express themselves freely amongst friends. Following the closure of the weekly Body & Soul party in 2002, the club started by DJ Timmy Regisford, Freddie Sanon and MerLin Bob has taken on even more importance and meaning, within the increasing sanitisation and restrictions of post-Giuliani New York.

Arriving on a deserted Varick Street in West SoHo as the hum of a bass drum emerges through the exterior of an anonymous building, we enter one of Manhattan's last subterranean havens. Rhythmic, deep and very intense, the gospel release of Dennis Ferrer's 'Church Lady' summons us to the heart of the dancefloor, where the dancers are immersed womb like in the music.

Through the loud yet beautifully clean sound system, the whoops and call and response hollers of the congregation creates a profound spiritual intensity, as the ritual of the dance unfolds. While the community from Harlem across to Queens are just waking up and dressing for church, a middle aged black woman walks slowly across the dancefloor, her arms raised in exultation towards the booth, where DJs Timmy Regisford and Sting International move monk-like in the darkness. Opening my eyes just as the heavy strings and drum break of Inner Life's 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough' raises the hairs and sends a shiver up the spine, I survey the scene around.

To my left on a small sofa, two Garage elders in Adidas bottoms nod out as if in a lucid dream of days gone by, while one of their topless soul brothers screams in synch to Jocelyn Brown's devotional lyrics. As talc is scattered around the borders of the spotless dancefloor, Lonnie Liston Smith's 'Expansions' increases the energy. Somewhere between the swirling angularity of Wildstyle era breakers and the balletic grace of eighties jazz troupes like The Jazz Defektors, a young crew drop some incredibly elegant yet raw moves, while a lone dreadlocks plays imaginary keys on the dancefloor. Lost in the groove now, a young Japanese girl smiles knowingly at us first timers, while Sting International works the EQs between Babe Ruth's 'The Mexican' and Man Parrish's 'Hip Hop Be Bop' before dropping into a trio of classic acid cuts including Mr Fingers' 'Can U Feel It'.

Looking around at the euphoric faces and sweaty embraces, Larry Heard's Trax classic needs no answer. As we step out into the afternoon sun, refreshed and inspired by our Sunday morning epiphany, I make a promise to return to New York to tell the story of some of those who have made Shelter their home.

It's early June when I land back in New York having arranged to hook up with Ben Johnson, the Londoner who has become Shelter's warm up DJ and owner of the Syam Music Group including Un-Restricted Access (URA), in partnership with Timmy Regisford. Sitting outside a SoHo Café in the humid Summer heat, he explains why the DJ dubbed 'The Maestro' had such a restorative impact on him when he arrived in New York in the mid Nineties.

"When Timmy was rocking The Shelter back in the day it was one of the only places you would here Afro-Beat and jazz and all these different types of music. He could do this and make it work partly because he had the courage to play 12 hour sets, feeling the connection with the dancers."

It is the combination of mood and movement that makes Shelter such an intense experience. "When I first saw the dancers I was just amazed," he recalls.

"There were guys doing capoeira moves and back arches, landing on one arm. And then all these different fusions, from African, Latin, tap and breaking and then the two step with everyone just so together and accepting, it was just beautiful - rhythmic and very spiritual."

Meeting up with Freddie Sanon later in the day he explains the genesis of the

club. "After the radio show at WBLS had finished around two in the morning we had nowhere to go, so Timmy, Merlin and I started talking and said we needed a place, somewhere we could call home. We felt the only appropriate name to call it was The Shelter because with the Paradise Garage closing there was no where else for us to go to - we were homeless."

Starting out as a reunion party for The Garage, The Shelter soon became a regular weekly. "We wanted to continue what the Garage had which we felt was special, a club where all these interesting people could get together and get loose, he continues thoughtfully. "A place where you could be gay, you could be straight, black or white - somewhere that you could get release from every day life. We wanted to keep that going - a feeling of being at a house party."

When Sanon first started going to clubs like the Gallery in the mid Seventies it was as an under eighteen and for him it is vital the crowd at Shelter crosses generations. "We need a place where everyone is accepted. When you come to the club you can see a sixty year old dancing next to a 15 year old who has sneaked in. The only way of keeping this scene going is to bring our kids and our nephews down to the club. That is our only hope that this lovely thing we have will continue. We need to pass the culture on for this to survive."

Taking a walk down to the Lower East Side later that evening I am determined to speak to some of those dancers whose story has become an overlooked footnote in the history of New York dance music. Outside a gallery bar on Orchard Street I meet Louis Kee AKA Loose, a veteran of the scene and one of the members of the Melting Pot collective whose DJ Kervyn Mark is dropping the house and broken beats indoors. "I started dancing in Manhattan in 1979, going to the Loft, the Garage and Better Days," he recalls. "At that time there was a real fusion of jazz and disco. When you went to the underground clubs the dancing was very intense, we did everything from ballet and gymnastics to martial arts and then these Nicholas Brothers Moves."

In parallel to the early UK jazz dance scene, the movements were influenced by the jazz tap style of dance from the thirties known as hoofing, as well as a myriad of other dance forms that reflected the moods and modes of DJs like David Mancuso at The Loft. "On the one hand you had the gay community doing their pre-voguing and then you had the rawness of early breakdancing. It was a real underground thing that came from what people had in their soul. For those of us who came through that it was all about the family thing as well, to have value in yourself and your community."

I ask how accepting the house community has been of the young breakers who crossed over to house dancing in the nineties. "Well here is a group of people who would not have been accepted at a regular house club but at The Shelter they were freely open to people with dance skills," he replies. "As long as the feeling is right and they understand the spirit of the community. So now a lot of the energy is actually coming through the breakers and they are taking it to a new level. You see, in the dance community you always have a home, somewhere that you first heard this music that made you want to be a dancer. So for us it was the Loft and the Garage and now these kids are calling Shelter home. Although they didn't go to those clubs they learned from those that did how to act, how to be warm and fun and also just as importantly not to compete and to see the dancefloor as a communal place. It doesn't matter what colour you are or what sexual orientation, as long as you are there expressing yourself in peace. It's also great that we've got this youth now in the scene."

Two of the youngest members of the Shelter family are The Martinez Brothers, the church raised sons of an ex Garage head from the Bronx who are breathing new life into the house scene. Sitting in a park around the corner from Dance Tracks record shop, the younger of the brothers, 15 year old Chris, recalls their personal conversion to house music: "We actually wanted to be hip hop DJs but our father came in and said 'nah I don't like the message they are sending out'. So he brought home some house CDs and started introducing us to the music he used





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on 7 mile alongside the Likes of Slum Village and Jay Dee who became a big influence on the young producer.

Around the same time, Quentin would also hang at the underground house parties like Heaven where DJ Ken Collier held court. For Harris the unsung Collier was not only an inspiration as a DJ but also as a gay black man on the house scene. "The man played with so much energy. He would literally make the walls of the room sweat. Also around that time I was really fighting with the whole am I gay thing what should I do, should I come out or will there be too many problems for me. So it was very empowering to go there and see this gay black man who was so respected within the community."

As producer for New York hip hop group The Masterminds, Quentin found himself spending more and more time in the city and became immersed in the house scene. "I would go to places like The Sound Factory and the original Shelter," he recalls eagerly. "I was just absorbing all this in - the music and the madness. I just got so wrapped up in it. Coming from Detroit where I had experienced Ken Collier I was looking for something like that and to me Timmy had the same kind of intensity."

While it took a move to New York to really inspire Harris as a house producer, his techier and soulful productions are clearly indebted to his hometown. "Detroit has been a major influence on my work," he states. "When you go there you will totally understand techno. It's industrial and dirty and that is reflected in the music. When you listen to 'Clear' by Cybotron which came out in 1980 that song still sounds fresh today, and I always loved things like that which were minimalist but powerful. So I learned a lot of that from both techno but also Jay Dee whose beats were very stripped down but they took you somewhere."

Following an inspired edit of 'Cloud 9' by Donnie, and India Arie's 'Ready For Love', things have been gaining momentum rapidly towards his debut LP 'No Politics', which develops Harris' role as a producer for singers like Cordel McLary, Colton Ford and Jason Walker.

As the conversation flows, we naturally move on to the division that has been created between the house and hip hop communities. "House got labeled not only as gay music but also repetitive but my argument to anyone in hip hop is that their music takes from all forms of music," suggests the man who has had his feet in both camps. "So to say these two don't belong together they are crazy because if

to dance to at the Garage and we just fell in love with it."

Eighteen year old Steve picks up the story: "Our first party was a Danny Krivit boat ride which was just amazing man. I'd been to a lot of hip hop events but I'd never experienced an atmosphere like that with everyone screaming and going nuts so that is what caught me most." The Body & Soul DJ has been one of the many supporters of the brothers, inviting them to play at the 718 Sessions, which along with occasional parties like Ruben Toro's Temple is vital to the scene.

The brothers first New York DJ slot was at The Shelter. "That was the first time we had ever been to the club and also seen Timmy play so it was like 'this man is a legend'. The way he works the system and blends and rides the records. No one does that like him. He is the man." Another fan is Dennis Ferrer who has just released the brothers first 12" 'My Rendition' on his Objektivity label. "We hooked up with Dennis on MySpace, sending him messages and mixes," explains Chris. "So he helped us with The Shelter gig and with our productions. He's become like an Uncle."

TMB continue a long and proud heritage of Latinos in New York dance music. However, their journey into house has not always been an easy one: "Our friends were mostly into hip hop," says Steve, "but when they heard what we were listening to they said 'what is up with you listening to this gay music, what's the matter with you are you a homosexual or something'. So we would just go... 'nah, whatever!'"

Back in the day, when DJs Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash extended and cut up the drum breaks from the early dance underground, hip hop and disco had a natural connection. However, the creation of musical ghettos through both social and cultural conditioning has resulted in many hip hop crews holding similar views to Chris and Steve's friends and similarly house people being turned off by the nihilistic message of much of today's hip hop. One figure who has broken down the barriers is Quentin Harris. Raised on a diet of Funkadelic and Motown in his Detroit home by his musical parents, this gay black American entered the music business as a trumpeter at Maurice Malone's open mic sessions at the Hip Hop Shop

Andy T's NYC Calc 10 (in no order)

1. **The Shelter** - Feel the spirit every Sunday morning
2. **Soulgasm** - EJoe Wilson, Red and crew take off at Sin Sin
3. **The Temple** - Ruben Toro's Chinatown Loft Party
4. **718 Sessions** - Love Is the Message at Danny & Benny's ball
5. **Ain't Nuthin But a House Party** - sweet Fridays with Jellybean
6. **Alma** - a Brazilian Love Affair
7. **The Loft** - beneath the balloons with the originator
8. **Roots** - Louie Vega and Kevin Hedge go deep
9. **Body & Soul** - occasional but essential
10. **Melting Pot** - It's a family affair from Lower East Side to Coney Island



The Martinez Brothers



"It's just a whole multicultural fusion that is going on and house is the epitome of that modern tribal thing in New York. It's so deep and free."

As the conversation flows he talks passionately about other dancers on the scene like Ejoye Wilson, one of the most influential house dancers and host of the weekly SoulGasm session, Cricket the "experimental b-boy", who has been integral to opening the doors of House music to b-boys, and Archie Burnett one of the hardcore Loft heads whose freestyle voguing and whacking earned him a role in the film 'Check Your Body At The Door', alongside Conrad who also features in Josell Ramos documentary 'Maestro'. But he is most animated when talking about the fusion of b-boy and house culture and the exiting possibilities it is opening up. "The dancing is changing radically. When I look at some of those kids I'm like 'wow!' - it's on a whole new level. They do their variations and power movements so crazed out and abstract. Then you have another level of style which is double jointed – taking the voguing and whacking forms of disco (which was an overlooked influence on the popping of b boys) to a whole new style, by tapping back into the breaking."

Outside the venue where Freddy Sanon is welcoming late guests, while keeping an eye out for the NYPD who constantly monitor the club, Conrad introduces me to a wonderfully bright spirit called Melanie, one of the many female dancers crossing over from other dance forms.

"I started dancing when I was three," she explains. "My family is Puerto Rican and my father would teach me the hustle and salsa. When I was about six years old my mother put me into professional dancing, doing jazz and ballet. My first experience of dancing at clubs was going to hip hop and Latin clubs but it is only at The Shelter where I have really experienced this feeling. Before then it was just learning the movements but here it was just total self-expression. Intertwining with all these different spirits you come in contact with so it's on a different level. The first influence of this is African and of course I connect with that through my Latin side. But it's just a whole multicultural fusion that is going on and house is the epitome of that modern tribal thing in New York. It's so deep and free."

Conscious that the role of women is often overlooked on the dance scene, Freddie Sanon introduces me to Donna Edwards, who started DJing in Queens back in 1982 before graduating to the clubs of Manhattan and eventually to become the first female DJ to play at The Shelter. "The first underground club I went to was Better Days where Tee Scott was DJing. He was a major inspiration," she recalls. "He also played at Empire Skate Rink and I skated every Tuesday night."

I am interested to know about the interaction between the clubs and the skate scene and in particular how much of an influence skating was to the graceful style of dancing that developed around clubs like The Loft. "I think the swirling and jumping has definitely crossed over from the skate rinks to the clubs and that's because pretty much everyone I knew that skated went to the underground clubs as well."



Sting Int. and Timmy Regisford

you look at it there is soul, funk and disco and house and hip hop are both an offspring of that. So they are both continuing that lineage from James Brown. Another problem is that a lot of powers that be think that people are not intelligent enough to appreciate different types of music so they keep giving people the same thing."

Cut to the floor of The Shelter on Sunday morning at 8am and the fiercest of the young dancers are dropping the most extravagant and expressive of moves, as Timmy Regisford builds the atmosphere and intensity. As they drop, spin and do some incredible handstands and swirling windmills I invite a key figure on the house dance scene and one of the pioneers of what became known as the Lofting style, Conrad Rochester to say a few words about the scene he has seen develop.

"The first time I really got into the House Dance side was in the park on the Lower East Side watching these guys doing bridges with kung fu slippers on, and I wanted to know where they hung out. And that's when the Garage and the Loft came in. And it's been building from there and now through all this new blood at The Shelter we've got something really exiting happening." As a promoter for nights at Shelter and other clubs around New York and beyond, Conrad is responsible for bringing in the dancers and building the scene on a global level.

As an educator and networker he is taking on a similar role to Perry Louis and his Jazzcotech collective in London. "I have just helped form House Dance International hosting workshops and competitions with kids from all over the world so this is growing all the time," he says excitedly. "We need to show the industry to respect the dancers because they need us. I don't think we've been respected enough in the past so that is why it is so important for us to network and put this thing out there, and to connect all the young kids with the elders."

Timmy Regisford Shelter nights.

1. Grand opening of #6 Hubert street 1991.
2. Last night at #6 hubert street - w/ Roy Ayers and Jaydee.
3. Sound of Blackness with Stevie Wonder live show 1991#6 hubert street.
4. Femi Kuti live show, at 20 west 39th street 2002
5. Opening night of 150 varick street, 2006
6. Summerstage, Central Park 2003 - Chaka Khan live.

Sting Int. Sound Systems

1. **Paradise Garage** -Richard Long
2. **Club Legend** - RL Brooklyn
3. **Love People** - RL Brooklyn
4. **Empire Roller Rink** - RL Brooklyn
5. **Club Shelter** - Integral Sound



Conrad's - Five House Dancers

1. **Linda M** - great technique new on the scene direct from Africa.
2. **Marjory Smith** - pioneering Cypher International Dance Contest in NYC.
3. **Ejoe Wilson** - been around the world and back. Legend.
4. **Shoe Ho** - next level of dancer hailing from Japan.
5. **Jesus The Dancer** - probably the best known dancer from NYC.

Conrad's 5 dance styles

1. **lofting** - floorwork, handstands, baby powder and free spirited danceform.
2. **vogueing** - strike a pose!
3. **whacking** - similar to vogueing with yet more hand and arm work.
4. **experimental** - self explanatory
5. **hustling** - stemming from salsa and ballroom, originating in the ny club of the 70's, this is the ultimate couples dance.

Crocker at WBLS in the early eighties. "He heard me spinning in a club and I went there and worked as an intern for three years for no money then he offered me a job," he recalls fondly. "I had one of my biggest musical educations under him. I learned so much under his wing it was just priceless what that guy impacted in my life. He taught me that there was more than just dance. There was jazz, blues, Latin and African."

It was this love of African music that saw Timmy dropping cuts at The Shelter way before other DJs picked up on Afro-Beat. "I started experimenting in The Shelter and found that this music worked so I started looking into the roots of it, and went to Nigeria and licensed Fela's music to Motown and signed his son Femi and produced his first two albums for the label. So that is my passion. I love African music."

I wonder if his new album 'Africa Is Calling' is making a statement to those ears that are closed to the plight of the great continent. "I don't think African music has been embraced as any other music. Be it jazz R&B or Salsa," he replies firmly. "Just like Africa itself is the only place that people don't really care about. I'm a firm believer that if we as a society wanted to build a better future for people in Africa we could do that. Just the powers that be choose not to."

I close by asking Regisford about his role as a mentor to other DJ's such as Sting International and Quentin Harris. "I've never seen myself in that role," he says humbly. "Sting is a guy who is like a brother and a real music lover. He has a real passion for music that is unbelievable. I am also very happy with the way Quentin is developing to become one of the strongest DJs and producers around."

While his productions skills have been put to multi-platinum use while producing Shaggy, Sting International remains firmly committed to the underground scene, something that started working as a DJ in Brooklyn. "The DJ sound systems are the roots of it all for me," he states with a soft drawl. "So it was a street thing to begin with. Richard Long had started doing sound systems for the clubs like Bond International and Paradise Garage but also for reggae clubs in Brooklyn, one called Love People and also The Empire Skate Rink. So they were all influences on sound and I got close to him and then I got tight with some of the guys who worked for him after he had passed away. So it just rolled from there getting heavily into the technical aspects of the sound and living through that whole era developing a reputation for that clean heavy sound. The Shelter is just another part of the sound systems so it's just a stem from what Richard Long set up back in the day. I play the system just as I did on my mobile back in the day. I do it the same way."

Entering the room, Freddie Sanon adds a few words to encourage others to embrace the spirit of Sting, which has seen him develop his own following down at The Shelter: "We need other young DJs to have the same passion and to take time with what they do. People just need to take more time and relax into what they do. Life is going so fast we need to take time for ourselves. Don't come in to the club with the rushed attitude. I don't think people appreciate what we have in life just getting up in the morning and being alive. We need to have that all around us and all the love and appreciation that comes with it - that gives life to us."

As I head back to my apartment to get ready for the Soulgasm party later that night I am reminded of what Conrad Rochester told me in the back room of Shelter, a sentiment that holds true for anyone who experiences the love and communality of this long running session. "What is great about The Shelter is that it gives us an opportunity to escape from our everyday dramas and problems. We can come here and express ourselves. House has always been underground and it's time for people to see this and to join us, because it deals with so many different styles and cultures from different urban communities. All you have to do is to tap into your free spirit and to express who you are through dance."

It's 2.30pm as I head back inside The Shelter where Timmy Regisford is squeezing the last drop of emotion as the house lights are raised. Some stand rooted to the spot their hands raised in the air shouting in jubilation towards 'The Maestro', others move organically around the floor swirling and stretching while a muscular ballet dancer swirls gracefully across the floor doing a pirouette. As the last bars of Mos Def's 'Umi Says' ring out at 3pm, and the intoxication amongst the dancers reaches its zenith, I am reminded of the intensity and community interaction of the rumba parties on the streets of Havana; such is the meaning of the ritual of the dance to those who make the pilgrimage week after week to this righteous session.

As I head out of the venue, I am introduced to an ex Garage head Frankie Paradise a well known face on the scene. "I was a loyal member of the Paradise Garage and as a gay man it was important to be geared towards the right sort of crowd, somewhere that you could be safe," he explains softly. "So I found myself moulded by that whole community. And for me that is continuing through The Shelter and I have been supporting it since day one. I love the fact that they have been able to hold on to this and give what's left to the community. All cultures and differences coming together - it's a spiritual thing where for a little while we all feel as one. Letting our minds go. For me Shelter is the last spiritual mecca in New York City. And what I feel here I've never got anywhere else but the Paradise Garage."

This recurring comparison between The Garage and The Shelter is something I put to the press shy but rather genial Timmy Regisford when I finally sit down with him on my final day in New York.

"We set it up because we wanted to keep the spirit alive of what the Garage represented and what underground music meant to the City," he says. "If we had not opened up the space there would have been a void. With Shelter that family thing evolved much more I think. At the Garage people knew each other but with Shelter it became much more family orientated. Those people left over from the Garage realised how special it was and started to really bond and called themselves the Shelter family."

Timmy Regisford has built a reputation for his epic 12 hour sets which take the dancers through a whole range of emotions. "I play music that I love that I would want to hear as a dancer. I know that because I come from the dancefloor so I know what they expect. I like to challenge them as well though and to take chances and I am lucky to be in a place where if it is quality music where they would embrace it."

It's an all embracing approach to music he learned as a radio DJ under Frankie